Note by LMB: This is the Author Guest of Honor speech I delivered at Denvention 3, the 66th World Science Fiction Convention, held in Denver, Colorado, in August 2008.

There still seems to be a convention website at present:
http://www.fanac.org/Denvention3/

Hi there.

I thank the Denvention ConCom for inviting me as writer Guest of Honor, to this 66th World Science Fiction Convention. I am amazed to be here.

I certainly couldn't have imagined this outcome at my first Worldcon as a professional writer, which was Atlanta in 1986, 22 years or fifteen minutes ago, depending on how you look at it. *Shards of Honor* and *The Warrior's Apprentice* were both just out–the ink was barely dry on the pages. My memories of that con are by this stage very fragmentary, but highlights include my first meeting with Jim Baen, in an elevator crush in the Marriott Lobby, my first Worldcon book-signing, sitting with my friend Lillian Carl–I think we signed about a dozen books each–my first encounter with the SFWA suite, meeting Brenda Clough for the first time in a hallway conversation–probably seeking oxygen outside the SFWA suite–and being awed that she'd completed six whole books, and wondering if I'd ever get there, and my first meal with my publisher, a breakfast with Jim Baen and Betsy Mitchell. I was in a tizzy about the upcoming contract for *Falling Free* at the time, and in a general mood of low-grade hysteria throughout. I don't now guarantee the accuracy of any of these mental pictures in the jumble.

So I am thrilled to be here, in this place that has been celebrating books and our genres for 66 years. You'll note I avoided specifying which genres. Folks have been arguing about the definition of Our Stuff since decades before I came in, and shall doubtless still be happily doing so for decades after I've died–whether science fiction, fantasy, horror, speculative fiction, our portion of Young Adult, paranormal, or nomenclature yet to be devised. I will use the traditional shorthand of "SF" for Our Stuff here, rather than "OS," because we don't need another acronym, with its attendant acrimony, which I have decided should be called acronymie.

But it does seem right to talk here about books, reading, and genres.

Although I don't dare a definition for our genres specifically, I do have a definition for genres generally. To my mind, a genre is "any

group of works in close conversation with one another." I like this definition for its inclusiveness–because there are genres in painting and architecture and music and a host of other human arts as well. This is also a working definition with the emphasis on the *working* part, genre from the creators' point of view.

There is a second definition of genre, from the reader's point of view, which may be described as a "community of taste," closely allied to but not quite the same as the first. Writers by nature have a foot in both camps, creator and audience–we do not go into the sometimes-maddening trade of writing because we are indifferent to books, but because we are ravished by them.

There is yet a third definition for genre, confused, as are many terms in the English language, by being attached to the same word, which is: genre as a marketing category, signified by all those labeled sections in the bookstore. Such labels had to be invented as soon as there became too many books for any one person to sort through in a reasonable amount of time, which turns out to be longer ago than I'd thought–certainly well back into the nineteenth century, and possibly as little as fifteen minutes after Mr. Gutenberg's invention. These categories are a welcome and necessary convenience, when they aren't perceived as more than that. But when genre labels in this sense start being used as counters in status games, or become walls dividing readers from books rather than doors leading to them, such labels can become toxic.

Folks try to stuff all these meanings and a few more into the word "genre," and are then surprised when it explodes.

In interviews, I am occasionally taken aback by a question of roughly the form, "What do you think the science fiction genre ought to be doing?" or, "Where do you think the field of speculative fiction is going in the next so-many years?" (With an occasional side-helping of "Isn't this genre dead yet?" Since people have been complaining about the death of the field since I came in, forty years ago, I have to answer this one, "Probably not." It's always dying, and always being re-invented by new writers who hadn't got the memo.)

But–as if *I* knew where it was going! I generally don't even know where my next *chapter* is going. How the devil do they imagine I could possibly speak for a gang of writers so varied and protean as the whole SF crowd? I eventually came to the conclusion that this question presupposes that there exists a sort of Platonic Ideal of SF, suspiciously closely matching the questioner's or the critic's personal tastes, toward which (in their opinion) all writers and all books should convergently aspire. And I think that this is a very old-fashioned literary view.

The more modern metaphor I much prefer is that SF as a field is an emergent property of the whole seething mass of writers and writing that make it up. It's a consequence, not a cause, and thus

wonderfully resistant to attempts at top-down direction. (Fortunately, most writers have a cat's disdain for marching, or being marched, in lockstep; as for me, I am allergic to being held responsible for things over which I actually have no control.) From the thousands of threads making up the SF tapestry, some larger picture may indeed emerge, but I am only responsible for spinning my own bright strand, thank you very much. In other words, I don't believe in an Intelligent Design theory for the SF genre.

Our genre conversation is a chaotic system, full of weird covert feedback loops and odd links to outside forces. Any idea of consciously directing it to some utilitarian end seems as wrong-headed to me as the notion of the writer as the heroic lone creator, a picture held and advanced by many non-writers, which is an outright lie, and evil insofar as it is taught to children. I know of no writer or other artist anywhere who hasn't come out of some context of other artists and a supporting community, with its own conversation–or argument–even though those contexts are usually edited out of the historical picture for simplicity. And I have deep misgivings about various attempts to rank art by its social utility. So while I may applaud for style various earnest attempts to direct Movements in SF, I have no belief that they will ever succeed in getting this herd of cats to the railhead in Abilene. And anyway, I was heading to Albuquerque. (Yes, that is a Bugs Bunny reference, for any who were in doubt.)

My latest adventure on the way to Albuquerque involved a turn bound to horrify those who buy into reading choices as counters in a status game. You know, the ones who are always exhorting writers to push the boundaries of the genre, but *for God's sake not in those lowbrow directions over there!* I had dipped quite a bit into our neighboring genre of mystery for book notions–giving a character a good mystery to solve is an excellent fantasy and science fiction alternative to the glut of war stories, another major plot model. (I could wish for more positive SF about, like, actual *science*. Science only seems cast as a villain, anymore, never a hero. But that topic deserves a whole ‘nother speech.) In fact, I once fancied a metaphor of genres as blood types, in which mystery was the universal donor, equivalent to blood type O, and science fiction and fantasy the universal receivers, equivalent to type AB. I'd also dipped more cautiously into our other neighboring genre of Romance–although I've not decided on its blood type–but I had never made it central to a tale the way I've used the mystery model. (Ask me later about my metaphor of genres as dog breeds.)

Romance is a genre I did *not* read or assimilate in my teens, when most of its readers imprint on it, though I did dip into it a bit in my early twenties, then drifted away again. My most recent encounter I blame on Catherine Asaro. Catherine is great–PhD quantum physicist, science fiction writer, ballerina, former SFWA president–if

she were a foot taller and had red hair I swear she'd be a Heinlein heroine. And she's also a huge romance fan. I love watching the genre-status-game players choke on her–you know the sort, the ones who denigrate Romance with much the same hysterical emotions as someone trying to avoid drowning by clambering up on the bodies, or genres, of the people next to them? A rhetoric that gets doubly nasty when driven by real or imagined economic jealousy. So when Catherine asked me if I'd contribute a novella to an anthology to be titled *Irresistible Forces,* of SF-Romance crossover stories, half to be by SF writers and half by Romance writers*,* I was delighted to participate in the experiment.

The results, not in terms of the stories but in terms of the *reader response* to the stories, were utterly fascinating to me. Although the two adjoining communities of taste were each reading exactly the same texts, I soon became able to spot which one any given reviewer came from just by the story elements they chose to pick out for comment, and the language they used to describe them, because there was almost no overlap. The SF crowd seemed tone-deaf to the emotional developments so important to the Romance crowd, and the Romance readers in turn seemed to be blind to the world-building concerns of the SF readers. And I said, "Cool! A pattern! But... what is really going on, here?"

This spun out into a reading exploration of recent Romance. I found it was at least as different a genre from the one I'd dipped into in the early 1970's as modern SF is from the SF of that same bygone era. Just like SF, Romance has become turbocharged by the exchange of information, debate, and reader reviews on the Net, and boasts a cadre of Net-savvy younger readers. And just like SF, Romance has also grown larger and increasingly balkanized into subgenres that may or may not still be speaking to one another. Although, interestingly, Georgette Heyer is still around. Heyer has been a sort of stealth SF writer, or at least read by huge numbers of SF fans and pros, for as long as I've known about her. My trip to BayCon in 1968 includes memories of my first encounter with Regency dances and costuming, inspired by her meticulously-researched books. Upon reflection, I now wonder if some of her appeal for our crowd is in her world-class world-building, which never flounders.

Anyway, with some of the Romance-SF crossover novels from the Romance side that I read early in my survey, I found a curious effect. The central plot delivered the emotional goods its readers wanted, but the SFnal world-building often failed to go all the way to the edge of the page. I began to wonder if one could in fact write a fantasy or SF book in which a romance plot was its central spine, but which equally delivered the world-building and other explorations so important to SF readers. Were the two genres intrinsically immiscible, or not? After all, what were romances but tales of the promulgation of

human evolution through sexual selection, and what could be more skiffy than that? Especially, as now convincingly theorized by some evolutionary biologists, if human intelligence itself is a result of sexual selection.

Four books later–*The Sharing Knife* tetralogy–like any good explorer, I feel bound to report back to the Royal Society. There are indeed problems for this Odd Couple partnership between SF and Romance, but subtly not, or not only, the ones I necessarily thought. I certainly learned some lessons about how genre boundaries are maintained not only by publishers, but by their readerships. And I'd long been aware of our genres' allergy to the domestic, with rare exceptions like the stories of Zenna Henderson. But it also brought up an element I'd actually played with in my earlier SF, about the peculiar tensions in Our Stuff between the personal and the political.

I expected to learn a lot about romance through writing one, and I did. I was more surprised to learn something new to me about fantasy and science fiction–which is how profoundly, intensely, relentlessly *political* most of the stories in these genres are. The politics may be archaic or modern, fringe or realistic, naive or subtle, optimistic or dire, but by gum the characters had better be centrally engaged with them, for some extremely varied values of "engaged." Even the world-building itself is often a political argument. And, oh boy, are the political aspects of the fiction ever valorized in the reviews. I had not noticed this the way a fish does not notice water. Only when I'd stepped onto the shore of the neighboring genre and breathed a contrasting air did I discover there even could be a difference–and what a difference it was.

Romance and SF seemed to occupy two different focal planes, to steal another metaphor, this time from photography. For any plot to stay central, nothing else in the book can be allowed to be more important. So romance books carefully control the scope of any attending plot, so as not to overshadow its central concern, that of building a relationship between the key couple, one that will stand the test of time and be, in whatever sense, fruitful. This also explains some SF's addiction to various end-of-the-world plots, for surely nothing could be more important than *that*, which conveniently allows the book to dismiss all other possible concerns, social, personal, or other. (Nice card trick, that, but now I've seen it slipped up the sleeve I don't think it'll work on me anymore.)

In fact, if romances are fantasies of love, and mysteries are fantasies of justice, I would now describe much SF as fantasies of political agency. All three genres also may embody themes of personal psychological empowerment, of course, though often very different in the details, as contrasted by the way the heroines "win" in romances, the way detectives "win" in mysteries, and the way, say, young male characters "win" in adventure tales. But now that I've noticed the

politics in SF, they seem to be everywhere, like packs of little yapping dogs trying to savage your ankles. Not universally, thank heavens–there are wonderful lyrical books such as *The Last Unicorn* or other idiosyncratic tales that escape the trend. But certainly in the majority of books, to give the characters significance in the readers' eyes means to give them political actions, with "military" read here as a sub-set of political.

So the two genres–Romance and SF–would seem to be arm-wrestling about the relative importance of the personal and the political. My solution for *The Sharing Knife* was to align the two levels by making the central characters be each a representative of their respective and conflicting cultures. Even so, to balance the elements I still had to divide the tetralogy into two halves, the first pair of volumes concentrating on cementing the relationship, and the second pair looking outward from this now-firm foundation once again to the larger stage. Most of all *The Sharing Knife* as a whole does not have a villain-driven plot, fun and cathartic as those can be. (I know: I've written a boatload of them.) For the political side, I set Dag and Fawn to wrestle with a much more difficult and diffuse problem, a demographic problem, not of merely destroying the villain *du jour*, but of building connections and friendships and fresh ways of doing things that will allow both their peoples to meet the challenge of many new dangers in their future. Building is harder than destroying. "Winning" in the usual sense is not what's going on, here, but the prize is certainly their world. Seeing where the books' argument is finally going to end up must wait for February 2009, and the last volume, *Horizon*.

The reader-response from the skiffy crowd so far has been exactly as my hypothesis predicted–once the focus shifted back to the political in Book 3, they perked up and decided it was really a story after all. Except for the usual holdouts, who only process action as significant when it takes the form of "guys hitting each other," who are likely not the audience for these books in the first place. Although I am reminded of Jacqueline Lichtenberg's tart description of action scenes, roughly paraphrased: "The story is going along, but then stops while guys hit each other. Guys hit each other for three pages, then stop. The story starts again." (I've been watching a bit of shonen (that is, boys') anime lately, and I must say that describes those episodes to a T.)

Which might be more interesting if you are a guy, true. I'm reminded of all those nature specials showing mountain rams madly bashing heads, while the harems of ewes stand around in postures of unutterable boredom. They'll get the good genes regardless; they don't *have* to care. But I digress.

A fan once took me aback by assuming that, because I gave my characters so many political problems to wrestle with, I must be

wildly interested in politics. Actually, I hate politics, especially contemporary–although this year I expect I have a lot of company. What's really going on here, I have decided, thinking about this misperception, is an application of my worst-possible-thing guideline–you know, my now-too-often-quoted stick for stirring up plots that goes, think of the worst possible thing you can do to *this* character, and then do it. Note the emphasis on the *this*, because it changes with each character. To my tastes, the worst possible thing I could do to *any* character is to force them to deal with politics.

I am also, as a creator, suspicious of the endurance of any piece of fiction too-heavily-reliant on contemporary problems for its interest. Near-future SF, valuable a part of the SF conversation as it can be, seems to me a sub-genre that comes with its own built-in sell-by date, seldom likely to stretch to "author's life plus fifty years". (Although such works can become historical artifacts, interesting as insights into their own past times.) Politics don't last; characters, however, do. Or, history geeks aside, we do not still flock to watch the plays of Shakespeare because of our urgent concern for Plantagenet or Tudor political issues.

So: *is* the personal political? It does explain the edginess of the mutual rejection between the communities of taste of SF and Romance–each is in effect rejecting the others' judgment of what is the most important aspect of the world, which naturally gets danders up. My own view is that the political sits atop the personal as upon a disregarded foundation; the concerns of higher status could not even begin to exist without a hell of a lot of unsung and often unpaid or underpaid work being done, and not just by women, to keep the real world running. To even acknowledge the debt would be to court bankruptcy, so it is carefully ignored.

And, let's face it, a lot of those domestic chores are boring, and a part of the readers' real lives anyway. Not the least part of the escape in escape literature is from the chores of life. Besides a natural biosocial attraction on readers' parts to power and status and tales about obtaining them, as built-in as a taste for sugar, book heroes don't usually spend a lot of time doing chores. Not on the page, at least. There are too many other variables to dub it causal, but I do note with some bemusement that my books with upper-class casts of characters sell better than my books with middle-class protagonists. Still thinking about this one.

The two opposing genres may also be doing different psychological work for their readers. With its YA roots, SF runs heavily to coming-of-age tales, where the principal work at hand is separation from the family and growth to empowerment. The former is often handily accomplished by burning down the village or blowing up the planet and massacring everyone in sight in Chapter One, which, at a certain stage of one's life, is not so much a nightmare as a

dream come true. Most all readers, if not young, have at least been young, and so can relate to the pattern. Romances may also start with burning down the village, if the heroine is young enough not to have already accomplished that separation, but the end-game of those tales is one of integration, rather than empowerment as such. The themes of later adulthood generally run to neither empowerment nor integration, but redemption.

Speaking of delayed adolescence, my this-year's exploration of the amazing twenty-first century has left romances behind for a time. But don't sigh with relief too soon, because they've only moved sideways on the status board, not upward–to anime and manga. Here's another example of the odd hidden currents in our genre conversation, since this latest exploration was triggered by two things last year–having gone with a writer-friend to see the traveling exhibit of shojo manga original artwork at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, and hearing Scott McCloud speak at Dreamhaven Books in Minneapolis. This in turn resulted in my reading Scott's three books on understanding comics. Which did exactly what good books are supposed to do, changed my view of the world. Shojo manga, for those who are as ignorant as I was, is a whole huge multiplex genre aimed at girls and women readers, utterly different from anything the American comics market offers. My own childhood brushes with comics as a medium were abortive–Donald Duck and superheroes failed to interest me, and the so-called alternative comics I encountered in my college years actively repelled me, ugly and angry as they seemed. (All right, I'll make an exception for Fat Freddy's Cat.) Scott was in Minneapolis actually to teach a short workshop at the art college. He made the very interesting remark that, as a result of shojo, he's now starting to see new young women artists picking up on the comics medium who are going to blow it wide open in ten years. I hope so.

My access to this exploration is also courtesy of an internet-altered and turbocharged distribution system, namely Amazon and Netflix. Netflix itself is moving to direct downloads, a distribution process that has among other things caused an unexpected explosion in the audiobooks market, with MP3 files people can play on their iPods. I have no idea where, if anywhere, these explorations will lead me creatively, once I start to digest them. But my next year's conversation will certainly have moved on by the increment of whatever I learn next.

So where is SF going in the twenty-first century, indeed? I don't know–I'm not steering. But it looks to be a fine ride.

I'm going to leave these meditations and go on, now, to a more free-form Q&A session for the rest of our allotted time, but let me knock off the first query myself, which is invariably, "But what about the new Miles book?" Rather than telling you about the new Miles

book, I'd rather show you–I will be doing a debut reading from its first few chapters tomorrow morning at 11:30. I will say that so far, it is jam-packed with politics and world-building. And... chickens. Still not sure what all I am going to do about the chickens, but that's another story.

Thank you.

(End note: the reading referred to in the concluding paragraph was, of course, from the first chapters of what became *CryoBurn.* At the time, the first few chapters were all that existed.)